

Maintaining Monmouth County Correctional Institution Operations During the Middletown Teachers Strike

In December 2001, a heated contract negotiation dispute between the Middletown Teachers Education Association (MTEA) and the Middletown Board of Education reached an impasse that led to the confinement of 228 teachers in the Monmouth County Correctional Institution (MCCI) in Freehold, New Jersey. After a strike resulted in the closing of Middletown schools for 4 days, teachers were brought before Superior Court Judge Clarkson S. Fisher, Jr., and asked to comply with a court order to return to work. Their subsequent refusal touched off a week-long media frenzy that entangled the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office, labor unions, Board of Education members, and the general public.

Effective communications proved critical in enabling the Sheriff's Office to navigate through the storm. Even before the first teacher was remanded to MCCI, the Sheriff's Office Law Enforcement Division became involved in the labor dispute because the Division is responsible for court security at the Hall of Records, where the court proceedings took place.

As the court proceedings began to draw national television and print media attention, Sheriff Joseph W. Oxley and administration officials maintained open lines of communications with the Administrative Office of the Courts. This invaluable relationship provided Sheriff's Office administrators with important lead time in preparing for the changing situation.

Throughout the strike, a daily cadre of more than 50 electronic and print journalists gathered at the courthouse in an attempt to provide continuous, 24-hour news updates. To satisfy their insatiable quest for information, Sheriff Oxley provided daily press briefings and background information. The media representatives were given frequent updates, and the Sheriff, Director Gary J. Hilton, and the public information officer made themselves available to answer questions. The public information officer also maintained an ongoing dialog with the

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assigned journalists, providing background on the mission and roles of the Sheriff's Office. These regular communications were well-received by the media, which created a positive working environment that helped to lower tensions between journalists and the Sheriff's Office.

At MCCI, the public entrances were closed off, except to visiting families and loved ones or for legitimate business needs. By distancing the inmate population from the undesirable attention of national media, MCCI avoided any potential disruption to operations.

The First Teachers Arrive

On December 4, 2001, Judge Fisher ordered the first four teachers to jail, setting into action contingency plans and preparations that the correctional facility had been putting in place for the better part of a week. Director Hilton and Warden Clifford J. Daniels met with Sheriff Oxley to discuss the possibility of housing more than 1,000 Middletown teachers for an indefinite period, along with an average daily population of between 900 and 1,100 inmates.

From the moment the first teacher came before Judge Fisher, Sheriff Oxley and administration officials maintained consistent leadership objectives. First, all teacher detainees had to understand that they were to receive fair and professional treatment, but they were required to adjust to the jail's existing routines and adapt to the sound correctional operating procedures in place. They were told that the Sheriff's Office would remain accessible and accommodating to collective bargaining officials as well as to media representatives.

During the planning stage, the facility had taken into account issues such as intake processing, housing, linens, and bedding. They had also recognized the need to explain the correctional environment to a population of schoolteachers and to interact constructively with the media. It was also important to plan for an eventual safe and speedy mass-release of the teachers. The jail administrators developed contingencies for mass housing in non-traditional areas such as the gymnasium and classrooms. And now, as per the order of the courts, the time to act had come.

Direct Supervision Eases Processing

MCCI is a 1,328-bed, maximum-security adult correctional facility. This modern, direct-supervision facility was designed and built in 1994 to meet the changing needs of a county that has seen unprecedented population growth over the past 2 decades.

Direct supervision played an important role in successfully managing the deluge of teachers admitted to the facility over the next 4 days. In addition to the 228 striking teachers, MCCI processed a contingent of 67 INS detainees along with the normal influx of prisoners that, over the course of any given year, brings over 12,000 individuals through its doors. Direct supervision enabled the Sheriff and his staff to appropriately "classify" and house teachers, based on a nationally recognized system including health, mental, physical and other factors. In

rapid fashion, Monmouth County was able to transfer existing prisoners and maintain a safe operating environment for teachers, inmates, and staff alike.

Cooperation with the Monmouth County Office of Emergency Management enabled facility administrators to stockpile bedding, linens, cots, and other supplies. The correctional facility's gymnasium was readied in the event that the teacher population exceeded the capacity of the housing units. Sheriff Oxley also worked with Director Hilton and Warden Daniels to maintain contact with the incarcerated teachers, answering questions, rectifying problems, and clarifying facility policy.

An Organized Release Is Orchestrated

By Thursday, December 7, a total of 127 teachers had returned to their jobs. Judge Fisher made it clear that any teacher not willing to return to work by 3:00 p.m. would spend the entire weekend behind bars. At this stage, Sheriff Oxley worked with representatives from both law enforcement and corrections to ensure the safe and efficient release of 228 detained teachers. The key was to provide comprehensive processing, and at the same time, to accommodate the needs of the families, media, and other interested parties.

On Friday, December 8, the order was given to begin processing the teachers out of MCCI. To facilitate this, MCCI drove busloads of released teachers to a common drop point at the far parking lot of the county courthouse, approximately 1/8 of a mile from the jail. This offsite location enabled the correctional facility to maintain secure operations while providing a convenient staging area for family, co-workers, and media representatives to congregate.

Additional correctional personnel were activated, and the entire process was completed in approximately 6½ hours. The organized group release made clear the intentions of jail administrators to give stakeholders access—but not at the expense of professional operations.

Several lasting impressions remain with us now that these events are past:

- Good working relationships, built on open channels of communications, between the courts and the various divisions of the Monmouth County Sheriff's Office helped to set the stage for an effective execution of the court orders.
- Direct supervision provided consistent direction and maintained peaceable order.
- Providing useful, comprehensive public information mediated tension and focused attention back onto the labor negotiations.
- An organized, well-thought out release plan left the lasting impression that, on all counts, jailed teachers were handled fairly and with a pervasive level of professionalism, from the top to the bottom of the organization. ■

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